

Evaluation of the Toronto Preschool Autism Service: A logic-model approach

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Autism is a disorder characterized by deficits in social skills and communication, as well as a noted presence of stereotypic behaviours. In past decades, the diagnosis of autism was not made until the child had entered the education system, at which point intervention was too little, too late. The advent of early diagnosis has allowed for earlier intervention, leading to suggestions of recovery or diagnosis removal. Furthermore, a deeper understanding of the deficits present in children diagnosed with autism has allowed for advances in the nature of treatment interventions.

The success of programs based on Intensive Behavioral Interventions (IBI) aimed at preschoolers with autism has been empirically supported in the past few years (e.g., Green, 1996; Smith, 1999). IBI takes into consideration the child's difficulty with traditional methods of instruction, and utilizes methods based on scientific principles of learning to bring about comprehensive and enduring improvements in a wide range of skills.

Various researchers have criticized outcome evaluation studies of preschool autism programs, stating the use of inappropriate or irrelevant outcome measures. We argue that in order to collect data on the appropriate variables, in particular outcome variables, and avoid the pitfalls of previous studies, it is necessary to empirically establish the components of the service provided. In addition, it is important to ask different people involved with the child, primarily their parents, what they feel is important to them. In my dissertation I focused on the Toronto Preschool Autism Service (TPAS), an agency responsible for the delivery of IBI to children with autism ages 2-6 in the greater Toronto area. I set out to devise a model of service that can be used for training and evaluation.

Parents of children served by TPAS, front line workers (instructor therapists), supervisors (senior behaviour therapists), psychologists, program managers and a government administrator were interviewed. The interview focused on four main questions in great depth: 1) Who does TPAS serve? 2) What does TPAS do? 3) What does TPAS expect to achieve and how? 4) How can it be done better?

Interviews are audio-recorded and are subsequently transcribed and coded by two researchers. The coding method condenses the interviewees' views into briefer statements or labels. In this investigation, statements are coded into subcategories and then organized into sets of overarching categories to build a "logic model" describing how the program, as well as parent and staff perceptions on different issues. In this project, parents and staff were also given an opportunity to provide feedback on the analyses of the interviews in the form of focus groups.

The logic model provides a strong framework from which one can generate research questions, determine appropriate indicators, and plot causal pathways between children's characteristics, treatment components, mechanisms of change and expected outcomes. Identifying the main components that are perceived as most important will improve the quality of service provided to the child. Furthermore, the interviews may clarify some areas of inconsistency between stakeholders in TPAS that required organizational intervention. This information will be of use to other programs designed to provide IBI to children with autism.